



Anne Spencer

“

*If ever a garden was Gethsemane,
with old tombs set high against
the crumpled olive tree--and lichen,
this, my garden, has been to me.*

— From “For Jim, Easter Eve” (1947)

”

Quick Facts

- * 1882-1975
- * African-American poet and feminist
- * Wrote during the Harlem Renaissance era

Biography

The Harlem Renaissance brought about a new wave of African American expression, art and creativity. This black literary movement was marked by prolific male writers such as Langston Hughes and Alain Locke. However, black female writers were also beginning to receive recognition and attention. Notable female writers included Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen. With the rise of black literature in the 1920s, poet Anne Spencer also began to receive the attention she deserved. She was received as a complex feminist artist who focused on humanity, nature, love, beauty, religion and race. She profoundly contributed to African American literature.

Annie Bethel Bannister was born on February 6, 1882. She was the only child of Joel Cephus Bannister and Sarah Louise Scales. Their marriage eventually ended, and Sarah left with Annie, moved to West Virginia and placed her in the care of William T. Dixie, a distinguished member of the Black community. Annie was a smart and quick to learn child who developed her relationship with the English language through inexpensive novels and periodicals. Her mother Sarah, never having the opportunity to be educated herself, sent Annie to the Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg, Virginia where she later graduated in 1899. In this year Annie also met her classmate and future husband Edward Spencer. Edward and Annie wed on May 15, 1901.

This page researched and submitted by Erin Murphy and Adrienne Lee on 12/20/05.



Anne Spencer

Biography continued

While she met and befriended many Harlem Renaissance personalities, Anne Spencer's most influential relationship was with James Weldon Johnson. Johnson not only discovered her unique writing talents, he gave her the pen name, Anne Spencer. Johnson decided on the name because it sounded more sophisticated than "Annie," the name by which she was known. Johnson later introduced her to H. L. Mencken who supported black writers and went on to help Anne publish her first poem, "Before The Feast at Shushan." It was after this that Anne took matters into her own hands and proceeded to publish many works without the aid of anyone else. Spencer's works were mostly published within the 1920s; they appeared in some of the period's most honorable collections.

Most of Anne Spencer's poems have romantic undertones with an emphasis on humanity and a quest for true beauty in a not so beautiful world. Anne Spencer sets her poems apart from more typical protest poems by intermixing nature with themes of freedom, humanity, and religion. Her metaphorical poetry easily transitions from vague to more specific purposes. Spencer drew her poetic themes of relationships between people, women's rights, and discrimination from her own life. She is well known for her imagery of gardens and nature. She also wrote frequently in iambic verse and used biblical and mythological themes. While Spencer's poetry seems traditional because of its form and nature imagery, she should not solely be seen as a nature poet. Many women writers wrote in these traditional forms, and Spencer's poems also express anger towards injustice. She was well aware of oppression as evidenced by poems such as "White Things." However, Spencer and many other women writers were more interested in poetry about nature than poetry about race. The public thought that protest poetry had become somewhat monotonous, and audiences were tired of reading about the trials and tribulations of the black oppressed. Although it has been over a hundred years since Anne Spencer put her first thoughts onto paper, one may delight in the timeless beauty that her lines evoke. Her poem "God never planted a garden" is a good example of metaphorical inter-change of her garden and her poetic participation, as well as the ageless energy of her words.



Anne Spencer

Biography continued

In his book *Time's Unfading Garden*, J. Lee Greene gives the reader a comprehensive and luminous account of Spencer's life and includes the largest collection of her poetry to date containing forty-two of her fifty published poems. Through this book one can explore the works of a black woman, who in her lifetime desired to remain true to herself at all costs, never allowing herself to be dictated into using a style or writing about an issue that didn't interest her. *Time's Unfading Garden* reveals the complexities of life for a black woman and poet who knew what she desired from her life; it also reveals the people who influenced Spencer and those she influenced. Greene says, "Anne Spencer is not widely known to readers of the present generation, perhaps because she published few of her poems during her life and never published a volume of her poetry or other writings. Nevertheless, the quality and social circumstance under which she wrote, and her association with and influence on writers and others of the Harlem Renaissance period give her an important place in the literary, social and cultural history of the twentieth-century black America." This fascinating biography underlines the derivation of one of our country's most interesting poets who relied on traditional form and structure for her poems, and typically used a metaphoric garden as a poetic theme. Critics often misunderstood Spencer during her lifetime. This limited her literary publication. Greene says, "Anne Spencer is among those writers of the Harlem Renaissance period who chose to limit their publications rather than conform to the dictates of critics and editors and publishers who prejudged for the readers." Greene also says that "defiance, determination, independence, and self-esteem were the essence of her life and writing." Greene suggests that Spencer's poetry generally flows from a defiant tone to a quiet, positive one. She combines this progression with imagery and language that are full of traditional color connotations.

Maureen Honey, author of *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* says of Spencer, "Pastoral beauty is a backdrop against which the ugliness of prejudice, hatred, and domination is effectively juxtaposed Spencer blended her two passions in lyrics whose import may not be clear to those unaware of their context. " In this book one can explore the many facets of poems written by Anne Spencer, from the strong cuts into racism in "White Things," to the clarity of "God never planted a garden," to the shapely poetic dance through nature in "Substitution." Honey states, ". . . nature is a common motif in much of this poetry. . ."; she explains that readers preferred Spencer's nature motifs because "Not only could women identify with a natural landscape . . . but the identification afforded them metaphors for describing their oppression" Also according to Honey, Spencer "brings to the surface the three major themes of women's poetry (equation of Blackness and femaleness with strength, resistance to white male oppression, survival of the core self) and illustrates how they are intertwined with nature metaphors."



Anne Spencer

Biography continued

Keith Clark, author of “Anne Spencer: Poet, Librarian,” in *Notable Black American Women*, says that Spencer’s poems tend to be romantic. Spencer blended this romanticism with the human beauty found within a filthy and foul world. She cannot only be viewed as a poet of nature because her work is much more than that. She places emphasis on human rule versus God’s rule on earth. Author Paul Reuben says “Anne’s poems are filled with themes of friendship, human relations, personal rights of women, and contempt for racial discrimination. Her settings, moods, and themes came directly from her everyday life. She masterfully created metaphors for human life by using images in her garden, such as birds, flowers, and insects.” Author Charita Ford writes “The living legacy which Anne Spencer left us in her poetry and other writings, her metaphorical garden, and her literal garden, represent the life of a great and, unfortunately, neglected Afro-American poet.” Most of her readers see her as a feminist writer whose poetry expresses love, humanity, beauty and nature.

In her later years Spencer created a garden that drew quite a crowd. Anne had maintained this beautiful garden in the back of her home. Her husband Edward, aware of Anne’s love for writing and gardening, built her this small garden house sanctuary and called it Edankraal. The “ed” was for Edward, “an” for Anne, and “kraal,” an African word meaning “place.” In this garden many exotic flowers were planted and in Edankraal many striking poems germinated. W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay were a few who visited her home turned museum. Today the Anne Spencer House and Garden Museum Inc. is responsible for the preservation of her house and garden at 1313 Pierce St. in Lynchburg. It has remained virtually unchanged since Anne’s death in Lynchburg, Virginia in 1975. After her death, many of her writings were lost. However, no one ever forgot the strong feminist voice from the garden that still calls out to women of color everywhere.



Anne Spencer

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

- "Before the Feast at Shushan" (*Crisis*, 1920).
- "Before the Feast of Shushan," "At the Carnival," "The Wife-Woman," "Translation," and "Dunbar" in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson (Harcourt, Brace, 1922).
- "White Things" (*Crisis*, 1923).
- "Lady, Lady" (*Survey Graphic*, 1925).
- "Lines to a Nasturtium (A Lover Muses)" (*Palms*, 1926).
- "Letter to My Sister" in *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea*, ed. Charles S. Johnson (National Urban League, 1927).
- "Rime for the Christmas Baby (At 48 Webster Place, Orange)" (*Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, 1927).
- "Substitution," "Innocence," "Neighbors," "Questing," "Life-Long, Poor Browning," "I Have a Friend," "Creed" in *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets*, ed. Countee Cullen (Harper, 1927).
- "Grapes: Still-Life" (*Crisis*, 1929).
- "Requiem" (*Lyric*, 1931).
- "For Jim, Easter Eve" in *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949*, ed. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (Doubleday, 1949).
- "The Poems" in *Time's Unfading Garden: Anne Spencer's Life and Poetry*, by J. Lee Greene (Louisiana State University Press, 1977).



Anne Spencer

Selected Bibliography continued

Works about the author

- The Anne Spencer Memorial Foundation. *Echoes from the Garden: The Anne Spencer Story* (a documentary film) (Anne Spencer Memorial Foundation, 1980).
- Ellmann, Richard, and Robert O'Clair, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1973).
- "Facts of File Encyclopedia of Black Women" in *America: Literature* (Facts on File, Inc. Vol. 2, 1997).
- Ford, Charita. "Flowering a Feminist Garden" (*Sage*, 1988).
- Greene, J. Lee. "Anne Spencer" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Afro-American Writers from the Harlem Renaissance to 1940* Vol. 51, ed. Trudier Harris (Gale Research Co., 1987).
- Greene, J. Lee. "Anne Spencer: A Study of Her Life and Poetry" (*Dissertation Abstracts International*, 1975).
- Greene, J. Lee. "Anne Spencer of Lynchburg" (*Virginia Cavalcade*, 1978).
- Greene, J. Lee. *Time's Unfading Garden: Anne Spencer's Life and Poetry* (Louisiana State University Press, 1977).
- Harris, Trudier. "Afro-American Writers from the Harlem Renaissance to 1940" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Gale, 1986).
- Honey, Maureen. *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (University of Rutgers Press, 1999).
- Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 1971).
- Quartermain, Peter. *American Poets, 1880-1945, Third Series Part 2: N-Z* (Gale, 1987).
- Roses, Lorraine Elena and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph. *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers 1900-1945* (G.K. Hall & Co, 1990).
- Salem, Dorothy C. *African American Women: A Biographical Dictionary* (Garland Publishing, 1993).
- Stetson, Erlene. "Anne Spencer" (*College Language Association Journal*, 1978).
- Witalec, Janet. *Harlem Renaissance: A Gale Critical Companion: Authors I-Z*. Vol. 3 (Gale, 2003).